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## **S.J. plan seeks to improve child care**

**COUNCIL APPROVES \$15 MILLION, FOUR-YEAR EXPANSION PROJECT**

By Katherine Corcoran

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The city of San Jose has a new, four-year strategic plan that aims to increase the number of slots in licensed child care and to improve the education of people working with young children in an effort to get more kids ready for school.

According to the plan, adopted by the city council this week, the city will spend \$15 million over the next four years to create 2,000 new licensed child care slots and to train 1,000 workers.

The expansion would come under the city's San Jose Smart Start program, which provides building and renovation money to child care centers and homes that agree to meet higher standards and to follow the city's kindergarten-readiness program.

The city also wants to turn its Smart Start logo, appearing on centers and homes receiving city funds, into a Good Housekeeping-like seal indicating higher-quality care. City officials met Wednesday with Gerry Cobb, a representative of the Smart Start program in North Carolina, where child care advocates got state licensing to create a five-star rating system, ranking child care facilities by quality.

San Jose is seeking technical assistance from the North Carolina program.

``What parents are told to look for is a license'' when choosing child care, said Deborah Simon, manager of the newly renamed San Jose Office on Early Care and Education Services. ``But that doesn't necessarily mean quality. If they see a license and Smart Start, then they know the provider has met other criteria.''

Smart Start centers and homes must meet rigorous child care accreditation requirements, or licensing standards for state preschools, plus agree to work with local elementary schools, have technology in the program and follow kindergarten readiness criteria, including testing of children as they enter and leave the program.

The strategic plan was drafted to increase access to affordable care and to address the lack of kindergarten-readiness standards and communication between early care facilities and public schools, city officials said. The city council approved the plan Tuesday.

According to child care studies in Santa Clara County, there is only one licensed child care slot for every four children, and more than half of the jobs in Santa Clara County don't pay enough to support a family of four. The average annual cost of licensed center child care for an infant -- \$11,275 -- is nearly the same as a year's salary at minimum wage.

Since the Smart Start program began in 1999, it has amassed \$19 million and created 1,044 new child care slots in nine centers and 26 family child care homes. The program has committed \$10 million to expand child care in redevelopment areas, and \$3 million to create more child care slots in existing centers downtown.

Karen Blinstrub of First Five Santa Clara County, the commission charged with spending tobacco-tax money on early childhood programs, said the Smart Start centers would be high quality, but she wonders where the money will come from to run the expanded facilities. Smart Start money cannot pay for salaries or operating costs.

`` It's a good plan, if we can fund the missing pieces," she said.

Other goals of the strategic plan include:

- Supporting local, state and national efforts to increase wages and benefits for child care providers, and raising support from businesses.
- Working with other local, state and national partners to bring universal preschool to San Jose, meaning preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds regardless of the parents' ability to pay.

The city's child care commission will oversee and advise the council on the plan.

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